



Journal des anthropologues

Association française des anthropologues

118-119 | 2009

Claude Meillassoux

*XVI^e Congrès mondial de l'IUAES - 27-31 juillet 2009- Kunming
(Chine)*

Open Letter to the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China

Petr Skalník



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jda/4063>

DOI : 10.4000/jda.4063

ISSN : 2114-2203

Éditeur

Association française des anthropologues

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 décembre 2009

Pagination : 395-402

ISSN : 1156-0428

Référence électronique

Petr Skalník, « Open Letter to the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China », *Journal des anthropologues* [En ligne], 118-119 | 2009, mis en ligne le 01 octobre 2012, consulté le 15 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jda/4063>

Journal des anthropologues

XVI^e Congrès mondial de l'IUAES
27-31 juillet 2009
Kunming (Chine)

**Open Letter
to the State Ethnic Affairs Commission
of the People's Republic of China**

Petr SKALNÍK

to Mr Huancai Li
c/o State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of
China
252 Taipingqiao Dajie, Xicheng District,
Beijing 100800
P.R. China

July 21, 2009

Dear Mr Huancai Li,

On July 6, 2009 I received an invitation letter for Prof. Nas, Prof. Vargas, Prof. Sunderland, Prof. Shahshahani and myself, signed by you, indicating that on July 26, on the eve of the 16th World Congress of International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), the named IUAES high officials will meet in Beijing with « a senior State leader of China ». We were told in the letter (copy enclosed) that we have to arrange, in fact rearrange our travel and that expenses will be bought by the Organizing Committee of the 16th International Congress of IUAES.

This invitation was a surprise to me as I was not at all planning to travel via through Beijing on my way to Kunming. No agenda for the meeting was mentioned except that it is « in honor of the IUAES leadership ».

At the same time as the letter was coming, there was a massacre happening in Urumqi where the local Uyghurs protested against killings of their compatriots in Kwantung. There were nearly 200 people dead, more than 1000 people were injured according to official sources. Unofficial sources spoke about many more casualties. Although this grave event directly touching the field of activities of your Commission, namely ethnic affairs, there were no signs either directly from PRC SEAC or from the Chinese Association of Anthropology and Ethnology. My life experience of studying ethnic problems in other countries (e.g. South Africa, West Africa, Soviet Union and Europe) have taught me that conflicts of the size like that in Urumqi this July or Lhasa last year are not and cannot be caused just by some malicious plotters. There must be also a deal of responsibility on the side of the power holders, your Commission not excluded. However, no self-criticism and constructive proposal for remedy has come out from China till this very day.

Therefore, I have to turn down your invitation for the above ethical reasons. Human rights were served a crippling blow in Urumqi by apparently wrong analysis and heavy-handed response of the Chinese state, your Commission included. I will not meet and shake hands with people who must be responsible for the above tragedy. I will not accept reimbursement monies and other perks mentioned from the Chinese state. I protest in this way against policies which smack of demographic aggression and ethnocide.

I also will not participate in the Kunming congress (to be held next week, July 27-31, 2009) because I do not want to be part of overt and/or tacit legitimization of evidently erroneous handling of nationality question in China. As a person with a particularly strong IUAES loyalty who participated in almost all its congresses and other events starting from Permanent Council meeting in Prague back in 1962 I was very keen on participating and playing active

role as a Distinguished Speaker, member of the Executive Council (EC) of IUAES, Czech member of the Permanent Council of IUAES, chairperson of the Commission on Theoretical Anthropology (COTA) and thrice paper giver. The above mentioned reasons, however, thwarted these intentions. Under present circumstance I would not feel free to express my thoughts and research findings.

There are however also additional reasons which I feel obliged to mention. A considerable number of would-be participants from abroad were unable to obtain Chinese visa and therefore had to call off their participation in spite of the fact that they received official invitation letters and were put on the official programme of the congress. A number of sessions/panels were ruined as a result. This is a breach of the solemn commitment of the organizers.

Many ethnic scholars from Yunnan and other provinces were not able to register for financial, technical and other reasons. According to the clause 5 of the Announcement which I received two days ago and which I also attach « Those who haven't got Invitations from the Organizing Committee in 2009, please do not come to Kunming for the Congress, where they are not permitted to enter the Venue according to the registration policy ». I find this clause not acceptable as it had been alright at past IUAES congresses, inter-congresses and its other events to accept bona fide anthropologists and ethnologists on an ad hoc basis. As the foreign delegates had all to be in possession of invitation letters so that they could apply for Chinese visa, I cannot but understand clause 5 as a clear warning to all those Chinese would be delegates whether belonging to one of ethnic minorities or the Han majority that they will be kept out of bounds of the congress if they were not explicitly invited. Again this is a very serious breach of the openness policy of IUAES and of the solemnly promulgated commitments of the Chinese organizers to ensure participation of all bona fide scholars. The more is the clause unacceptable if we realize that one of the major reasons for choosing Kunming and China as the venue of the congress has been the existence of a large number of ethnic minorities and a host of studies on them by both Han and minority scholars.

Petr Skalník

Last but not least I should mention that the response of the organizers was not persuasive as regards the huge spread of pandemia of H1N1 flu in all parts of the world and China is not excluded. Are delegates coming in on planes containing one passenger suspected of having contracted the flu virus because they were among close by passengers to be put into quarantine and thus made to miss the congress? How will they be medically treated if found infected?

Before I close up this letter, please let me express my regrets that matters mentioned above which compel me to call off my participation in the Kunming congress may be seen as throwing shade on the good work of the organizers and the academic results achieved by Chinese anthropologists and ethnologists. I have lot of admiration for them and they know it. I would like to emphasize that this letter was written by myself alone and I express my views freely as I did when I criticised apartheid policies in South Africa, misguided theories and practices in ethnic field in the Soviet Union or failure of American anthropologists to warn the then U.S. government of the adverse consequences of its war plans and acts in Iraq. Anthropologists and ethnologists by the nature of their work which includes ethics of research, respect for human life and culture, do not know of any « internal affairs », especially if human rights are violated.

Respectfully yours,

Petr Skalník
IUAES Vice-President
COTA Chairperson

CC: Members of the EC of IUAES, chairpersons of research commissions of IUAES, individual members of IUAES, delegates to 16th World Congress of IUAES to be held at Kunming 27-31 July 2009, officials of World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), Pan African Association of Anthropologists (PAAA), Czech Association of Social Anthropologists (CASA), Czech National

Committee for Anthropology and Ethnology, anthropologists and ethnologists worldwide.

* * *